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### Imagining and mapping the end of an empire: Oskar Spate and the partition of India and Pakistan

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## **Imagining and mapping the end of an empire: Oskar Spate and the partition of India and Pakistan**

### **Abstract**

In July 1947, the British government of India convened two boundary commissions for the purpose of partitioning the colony into two independent nation states: India and Pakistan. Despite the volume of scholarly work on partition, little attention has been paid to its geographies. This paper addresses this lacuna in two ways: first, by inserting a geographical account into wider historiographical narratives of partition through cartographic-visual analysis and the application of geographical literature. Second, by bringing some of the themes and theoretical contributions from literature on partition into a geographical framework by highlighting the ways in which technical geographical terminology and boundary making practices were used for the political purpose of claiming territory. The paper pursues both of these aims through a biographical approach, examining in detail the unexamined papers of the British geographer Oskar Spate and his minor yet revealing involvement in the Punjab Boundary Commission hearings of July 1947. The paper argues that a territorial divide was unable to resolve the tensions that lay at the heart of the process of partition. This was not simply because geographical expertise was disregarded, but because geographical knowledge and analysis could not provide an adequate solution to the problem of overlapping yet ideologically distinct imagined territorial homelands. The paper thus points to the varied and ambiguous role that maps and mapping played in post-war sites and projects of decolonisation.

### **Keywords**

partition; South Asia; borders; boundary making

## Imagining and mapping the end of an empire: Oskar Spate and the partition of India and Pakistan

In July 1947, the British government of India convened two boundary commissions, for the purpose of partitioning the colony into two independent nation states: India and Pakistan. For nearly two centuries, the English East India Company, and then the British government, had attempted first to conquer the subcontinent, and then to consolidate their economic and political dominance. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, the government found itself facilitating the transfer of power to the nationalist political parties that were to become the new independent governments of India and Pakistan.

Matthew Edney has argued persuasively that British surveyors and mappers of India did not construct a comprehensive and objective map of a 'real' India, but rather a 'British India' based on 'the India that they perceived'.<sup>1</sup> The British created a 'conceptual image' of India, as Edney puts it, through the entwining of colonial categories of identity and geographical and survey data. In tracing the development of this 'conceptual image', Edney examines the role of cartography as one of the most potent colonial technologies of power: mapmaking as a means of visualising territory, scoping identities, and inducing and supporting the exercise of power. These cartographic technologies were central to the construction of boundaries both on the map and in the cultural world of British India, and made it possible to visualise and imagine a territory divided and ordered by boundaries that mapped onto clearly defined social and political identities. But what happened to the map, and the spatial imagination of colonial power, at the moment of decolonisation, and as colonial India was split into India and Pakistan? Did the map and the technology of seeing and categorising still exert authority and influence?

Taking some of its cues from Edney's analysis, this paper shifts attention away from the project of colonial mapping in India and towards the implications of this critical outlook for scholars of decolonisation, and specifically for scholars of partition. What happened when eighteenth- and nineteenth-century maps (and the volumes of geographical data that

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<sup>1</sup> M.H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843*, Chicago, 1997, 2.

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accompanied them), which had been geared to the ‘scientistic ideology’ of the British Empire, were put to work for purposes of dismantling that empire?<sup>2</sup> To what extent were the cartographic representations of the potential future territories of India and Pakistan rooted in colonial ideologies of difference? Could the colonial practices and imperialist philosophy of British geography, mapping and surveying be effectively mobilised for nationalist or post-colonial agendas? As the imperial world order broke down, were geographers able to refashion and reimagine their tools and techniques in the context of a world without European empires? This paper will argue that for one of those geographers, Oskar Spate, this process — which involved the invoking of colonial maps and colonial geographical data for the purpose of drawing new postcolonial boundaries in the Punjab — was only partially successful, and was limited by the nature of the materials themselves. This is because these materials had been collected, collated and disseminated as part of the colonial geographical project to construct a ‘conceptual image’ of British India, and were ultimately challenged and limited by the complex everyday local practices and realities that made a so-called workable partition so difficult to enact.

### PARTITION HISTORIES AND GEOGRAPHIES

The history of partition, which included the drawing of one of the longest territorial boundaries on the globe, and the violence, conflict and trauma that followed, is both highly contentious and well-studied by scholars across the disciplines of history, political science, anthropology, sociology and literary and cultural studies.<sup>3</sup> The authority of the official archive has been both challenged and augmented by substantial research on oral narratives, memory and cultural representations.<sup>4</sup> However, geography and geographers feature remarkable little in the volume of scholarly work on partition. This is curious given the obviously geographical nature of territorial partitions, although it speaks in part to a wider issue around contemporary geographers’ engagement with the rapid changes in global and regional geopolitics wrought by both decolonisation processes and the territorial reordering

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<sup>2</sup> Edney, *Mapping an Empire*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent overview of the scope and trends in partition historiography, see W. Gould and S. Legg, Spaces before Partition: an introduction, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42 (2019) 69–79.

<sup>4</sup> U. Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Durham [NC](#), 2000; R. Menon and K. Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, New Brunswick, 1998; G. Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge, 2001.

following World War II. This lack of engagement by geographers with the transdisciplinary debates in South Asian partition studies has also contributed to the development of a set of assumptions about the role of both geographical practice and geographers in the partition process itself. In particular, much of the historical literature on partition notes that a relative lack of geographical data and knowledge on the part of the boundary makers contributed to a particularly violent and unstable outcome. The implication is that the final outcomes might have looked different had there been a greater reliance on geographical expertise. This claim is not necessarily incorrect, but a historical geographical study of the Punjab Boundary Commission can indicate that British geographers occupied a more ambivalent and contradictory position in the process of decolonisation in India than it allows.

This paper aims to engage specifically with this lingering question of geography's role in partition, and it does so in two ways. First, by inserting a geographical account of the partition of India and Pakistan into wider historical narratives of partition. Second, by bringing some of the themes and theoretical contributions from partition studies literature into a geographical framework. The specific focus is on Oskar Spate, [a geographer](#) who served in Burma and India during World War II, worked from 1947 at the London School of Economics (under the wing of the redoubtable Dudley Stamp) and whose imperial biography is complicated by the fact that for a short period during his undergraduate years at Cambridge he had been member of the Communist Party. Spate was sympathetic to the nationalist position in India, and he felt a sense of responsibility towards the Indians with whom he worked, but his outlook and expertise were still shaped by a set of metropolitan imperial values. As will be shown, he was far from able to provide a truly transformative solution to the geopolitical problem at hand.

Spate was a minor player in the Punjab Boundary Commission hearings of July 1947, but his contribution raises important wider questions about the links between cartography and decolonisation, and the effects of the one on the other. He was a contracted specialist working on behalf of one group of nationalist stakeholders involved in the negotiations, the Muslim League, which agitated for an independent Pakistan. In this role he occupied a contradictory position familiar to many academic social scientists who apply their expertise in so-called 'practical' contexts.

The biographical approach pursued in this paper is drawn from a growing genre of scholarly literature (and not least within geography) that excavates the nuances and idiosyncrasies of imperial and governmental organisation and networking through a rigorous

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examination of the careers and activities of individuals. Geographers Miles Ogborn, David Lambert, Alan Lester and Stephen Legg have produced particularly comprehensive biographical studies in this vein, focusing on a variety of colonial and postcolonial contexts.<sup>5</sup> Legg, for example, has demonstrated how biographical approaches can highlight the tensions between individuals and institutions, and [shows](#) how Ann Stoler's concept of 'tensions of empire' [b](#)-Bringing the agendas and particularities of metropole and colony into a single analytical frame [, this tension](#) manifests itself in individuals as 'ambivalence'.<sup>6</sup> Isla Forsyth has examined the sites of development of early twentieth-century military camouflage through a biographical study of Hugh Cott, while Ruth Craggs and Hannah Neate have shown how studies of academic 'careering' in the post-war era of decolonisation can highlight the mobility of knowledge and shifting intersections between knowledges, institutions and individuals.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, David Lambert and Philip Howell have examined the career of John Pope Hennessy, governor of both Barbados and Hong Kong in the late nineteenth century, to highlight the transience and mobility of colonial ideas and practices of governance and reform.<sup>8</sup> In this vein, this paper uses a biographical approach to examine one, seemingly minor, episode in Spate's career in order to consider geographical practice in the context of geopolitical transition and upheaval.

Drawing on a wide range of material produced by Spate in his work for the Muslim League – including notes, journals, letters, maps and published academic articles – I aim to show that the practice of territorial partition as a project of applied geography was a complex individual and collective negotiation between the political and the technical. In particular, Spate's collection of draft maps and hand-written notes illuminate the many ways in which the geographical story of partition is both interwoven with and distinct from the [more well-](#)

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<sup>5</sup> D. Lambert and A. Lester (Eds), *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, 2006; M. Ogborn, *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550-1800*, Cambridge, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> S. Legg, Ambivalent improvements: biography, biopolitics, and colonial Delhi, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 40 (2008) 38.

<sup>7</sup> I. Forsyth, *Second World War British Military Camouflage: Designing Deception*, London, 2017; R. Craggs and H. Neate, Post-colonial careering and urban policy mobility: between Britain and Nigeria, 1945–1990, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42 (2016) 44–57.

<sup>8</sup> D. Lambert and P. Howell, John Pope Hennessy and the translation of 'sSlavery' between late nineteenth-century Barbados and Hong Kong, *History Workshop Journal* 55 (2003) 1–24.

[better](#) known historical and political narratives of partition. Using this material, I will show how the geographical data presented to the boundary commission was rooted in the British colonial spatial imaginary of India, as well as how this data was creatively mobilised and changed by the various parties and individuals in the construction of their territorial claims.

Timothy Mitchell has argued that scientific expertise was mobilised for the political purposes of state-building in Egypt in the twentieth century, a phenomenon he terms 'techno-politics'.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, I am interested here in the ways in which a scientific discourse of objectivity, rationality and functionality was deployed (with varying degrees of success, of course) both by Spate and by the main parties during the Punjab Boundary Commission hearings, in order to construct arguments and maps in support of competing claims. Specifically, these claims exploited geographical vocabulary and the language of physical and social landscapes. However, the claims themselves were often deemed by Spate, by members of the boundary commission and by scholars and commentators writing after 1947 to be irrational, subjective and ignorant of the geographic specificities and technicalities of what the American boundary-making expert, Stephen B. Jones had previously called a 'workable boundary' [and what Spate called 'good working frontiers'](#).<sup>10</sup> This paper explores how, in cases of applied geographical practice, the concepts of objectivity and detached expertise work variously as an ideal to aim for, a smokescreen to hide unpopular or suspicious political manoeuvring and an excuse when events do not play out according to plan.

The paper will argue that one of the reasons that geography was not well-equipped to deal effectively with the territorial and political challenges and tensions contained within the process of decolonisation in India was because there was no clear technical geographical solution to the political problems at hand. I will highlight how Spate's work [brings to light](#) [makes evident](#) an epistemic tension inherent within the partition process itself [that which](#) made it impossible to reconcile the nationalist claims to imagined territorial homelands with the real outcome of a technical boundary making procedure. No party would see their imagined homeland come to fruition, because the boundary, once established, would inevitably cut across all of the imagined territories at play during the negotiations. This

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<sup>9</sup> T. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, Berkeley, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> [S.B. Jones, \*Boundary-Making: A Handbook for Statesmen, Treaty Editors and Boundary Commissioners\*, New York, 1945; 19 July 1947, personal diary entry, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra \[hereafter Spate Papers, NLA\] MS 7886, 6-1-1.](#)

argument echoes to some extent the assertion made recently by Ankush Agrawal and Vikas Kumar that political conflict and armed struggle in the State of Nagaland can be partly traced to conflicting maps and surveys that have been mobilised by various parties to advance competing territorial claims.<sup>11</sup>

One other prominent geographer was officially involved in the partition process. The Indian geographer, S.P. Chatterjee, based at the University of Calcutta, was one of fourteen members of the non-Muslim delegation to the Bengal Boundary Commission. Although the commission hearings were held concurrently, the Bengal commission hearings and the final award were distinct from the Punjab case. In Bengal, for example, enclaves were granted to various communities, leaving non-contiguous units on either side of the border (Spate's suggestions for enclaves in the Punjab are examined in greater detail below).<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, while historical work has tended to focus on the Punjab border and has marginalised Bengal, as Joya Chatterji has observed, geographical work concerned with boundaries has been relatively more preoccupied with the Bengal border.<sup>13</sup> While a comparative analysis of Spate and Chatterjee would provide significant insight, particularly into the relationship between British and Indian geography during this period, this paper is interested more specifically in Spate's application of his colonial knowledge and expertise in the Punjabi context. Emphasis will be placed on the ambivalence and tensions inherent within Spate's role as an expert who wielded some of the authority claimed by the coloniser, while at the same time working on behalf of Indian stakeholders. His example brings to light issues around colonial power and technical expertise, and where white Anglo-American geographers should and do sit in relation to calls for liberation, equality and justice. This paper is also the first to conduct a

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<sup>11</sup> A. Agrawal and V. Kumar, Cartographic conflicts within a union: finding land for Nagaland in India, *Political Geography* 61 (2017) 123–147.

<sup>12</sup> J. Cons, Narrating boundaries: framing and contesting suffering, community, and belonging in enclaves along the India–Bangladesh border, *Political Geography* 35 (2013) 37–46.

<sup>13</sup> J. Chatterji, The fashioning of a frontier: the Radcliffe line and Bengal's border landscape, 1947, *Modern Asian Studies* 33 (1999) 186–187; W. van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, London, 2005; R. Jones, Whose homeland? Territoriality and religious nationalism in pre-partition Bengal, *South Asia Research* 26 (2006) 115–131; R. Jones, The false premise of partition, *Space and Polity* 18 (2014) 285–300; Cons, Narrating boundaries; I. Iqbal, The space between nation and empire: the making and unmaking of Eastern Bengal and Assam Province, 1905–1911, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74 (2015) 69–84.



detailed and extended analysis of a significant number of draft maps and notes produced by Spate during the Punjab Boundary Commission proceedings.

#### OSKAR SPATE AND THE PUNJAB BOUNDARY COMMISSION

In the summer of 1947 the Cambridge-educated ~~geographer~~ Oskar Spate, then thirty-six and a lecturer at the London School of Economics, was hired by the Ahmadiyya community, a Muslim sect concentrated in the Punjab, to assist them in devising a geographical claim to Qadian, the town that was their spiritual home and religious headquarters. The Ahmadiyya were considered ‘heretical to orthodox Muslims whether Sunni or Shia’ and the community’s members lived ‘as far afield as Africa and Argentina’.<sup>14</sup> Qadian was ‘a Muslim enclave’ located about fifty-five kilometres north-east of Lahore. The town was established by the Mughals in the sixteenth century and the sect was founded there in 1908. Spate observed that the place was ‘a petty state within a State – crimes were reported to the Ahmadiyya authorities before the police’.<sup>15</sup> The community was deeply concerned over the possibility that Qadian might not be awarded to Pakistan. This was the only community to hire a foreign professional geographer to support its claims to the Punjab Boundary Commission.

Spate was recommended for the job by his colleague, the eminent British geographer Dudley Stamp. Spate recalled that he ‘knew nothing of the Ahmadiyya beyond the name, and had never heard of Qadian’.<sup>16</sup> He had, however, spent time in South Asia, working as a lecturer at the University of Rangoon in Burma in the late 1930s, and was stationed in India from 1941 until the end of World War II. In 1941 he was a casualty of the first Japanese air raid on Rangoon. Evacuated to India with serious wounds, he subsequently became a military press censor in the British army’s public relations office in Bombay. In 1944 Spate was promoted to the rank of major and took charge of the Burma Section of the Inter-Service Topographical Department of Southeast Asian Command, based in New Delhi and then Kandy in Ceylon. In his 1991 memoir he reasoned that his ‘one qualification’ for becoming involved in the Punjab Boundary Commission of 1947 was that, in his spare time, he ‘had written what I believe to have been the first article on Pakistan by a professional geographer,

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<sup>14</sup> O.H.K. Spate, *On the Margins of History: From the Punjab to Fiji*, Canberra, 1991, 55.

<sup>15</sup> Spate, *On the Margins of History*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> Spate, *On the Margins of History*, 48.

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sent from Bombay in 1943 on my monthly ration of nineteen airgraphs (a sort of microfiche) with maps on four air letters'.<sup>17</sup>

Even so, Spate had more experience of the subcontinent than Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who chaired the boundary commissions for the British government. Radcliffe had neither visited India nor undertaken any serious boundary making duties during the course of his distinguished career as a lawyer and law lord. This point, noted by both academic and non-academic commentators on partition, is often cited not merely as evidence of the British government's poor handling of the situation, but also of the perceived lack of geographical expertise deployed throughout the partitioning process that was noted above.<sup>18</sup>

The role and position of Spate's expertise, as part of but not central to the process, can partly be explained by Joya Chatterji's observation that there was 'a tradition in British Indian civil administration to confer the most responsible and prestigious jobs upon the "confident amateur" rather than the "narrow technician"'.<sup>19</sup> Spate, as a 'narrow technician' in the context of partition, was granted an observational and advisory rather than a decision-making or power-wielding role. This position nurtured a political distance from the boundary commission itself and emphasised a possible mistrust of colonial experts passing political judgement.

Spate's lucid and witty commentary on the proceedings of the Punjab Boundary Commission in his Lahore diary and published articles has provided historians of partition with what they have regarded as the detached and authoritative perspective of an observer who sat 'on the margins', as Spate himself described his vantage point). Historians such as Ayesha Jalal, Lucy Chester, Joya Chatterji, Jerry Brotton and Gyanesh Kudaisya and Tan Tai Yong have used facts, arguments and observations on the boundary commission hearings from Spate's published and unpublished writings to augment their analyses of the nature and

<sup>17</sup> Spate, *On the Margins of History*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, L. Chester, *Borders and Conflict in South Asia: The Radcliffe Boundary Commission and the Partition of Punjab*, Manchester, 2009; J. Chatterji, *The fashioning of a frontier: the Radcliffe line and Bengal's border landscape, 1947*, *Modern Asian Studies* 33 (1999) 185-242; J. Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge, 2007; Y. Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, New Haven, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> J. Chatterji, *The fashioning of a frontier: the Radcliffe line and Bengal's border landscape, 1947*, *Modern Asian Studies* 33 (1999) 186-187.

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effects of this crucial geopolitical decision for India and Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> Spate's work on partition also influenced both geographers at the time, such as ~~S.P.~~ Chatterjee, Ali Tayyeb and Nafis Ahmad, and the more recent work of environmental historians such as A.A. Michaels and political geographers such as Graham Chapman and Willem van Schendel.<sup>21</sup>

Spate has generally been used by scholars in two ways. The first is as a relatively 'objective' eyewitness to the work of the Punjab Boundary Commission. Chester, for example, draws on his Lahore diaries to illustrate the rushed and haphazard nature of the proceedings.<sup>22</sup> Second, Spate's published work is used as a geographical authority on the results of the Radcliffe award, and on Indian geography more generally. His overall assessment of the Radcliffe Award, specifically that it favoured the Congress Party in the Punjab and the Muslim League in Bengal, is generally regarded by these scholars as accurate, and his descriptions and analysis of the award provides a factual basis for their arguments. Such a reading is indeed valid, but it does not explore the substantive technical work that Spate actually did in the Punjab. By examining this technical work, we can develop a more nuanced and accurate picture of the contributions and limitations of Anglo-American geographers conducting applied work within processes of decolonisation.

Spate's article on Pakistan, written in 1943, was indeed the most substantial academic work by a Westerner on the geography of Pakistan available at that time. Titled 'Geographical aspects of the Pakistan scheme', the article sought to provide an overview of the idea of Pakistan for a British academic audience. Spate outlined two key geographical arguments which had been mobilised by supporters of the Pakistan scheme, and which were central to the Muslim League's subsequent territorial claims. The first was an argument about

<sup>20</sup> A. Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: The Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*, Cambridge, 1994; ~~L.~~ Chester, *Borders and Conflict in South Asia*, ~~Manchester, 2009~~; ~~J.~~ Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge, 2007; T.Y. Tan and G. Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, London, 2002; J. Brotton, *A History of the World in Twelve Maps*, London, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> ~~A.~~ Tayyeb, *Pakistan: A Political Geography*, Oxford, 1966; N. Ahmad, *An Economic Geography of East Pakistan*, Oxford, 1968; G.P. Chapman, *The Geopolitics of South Asia: From Early Empires to the Nuclear Age*, Surrey, 2012; W. van Schendel and E. de Maaker, Asian borderlands: introducing their permeability, strategic uses and meanings, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29 (2014) 3-9.

<sup>22</sup> ~~Luey P.~~ Chester, *Borders and Conflict in South Asia: The Radcliffe Boundary Commission and the Partition of Punjab*, ~~Manchester, 2009~~.

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the geographical bases of territorial delineation. Spate wrote that supporters of the Pakistan scheme argued that ‘geographical factors combine with those of religion and custom to differentiate the Muslim areas from the rest of India so completely that none but an administrative unity, crushing all local interests, is possible’.<sup>23</sup> This argument in favour of Pakistan, which Spate said had ‘a very strong bias towards geographical determinism’, linked the Muslim majority in the north-west region of the subcontinent to a particular set of geographically conditioned cultural and religious practices which were distinct from the practices of Hindu communities further south, and worked to justify the notion that Muslims constituted a separate ‘nation’ in India.<sup>24</sup> Some of these social and cultural factors included occupation, dress, custom and an historical association with and preference for the Urdu language, although the political mobilisation of these factors is part of the long and complicated history of communalism and nationalism in South Asia.<sup>25</sup>

Spate noted that population maps could be, and had been, mobilised by supporters of Pakistan to illustrate this territorial relationship. He cites Rehmat Ali’s work and that of ‘El Hamza’.<sup>26</sup> These maps were informed by and often based upon maps produced by the government which depicted simple population majorities using categories captured by the census. The primary category deployed by proponents of Pakistan was, of course, religion, although the government produced maps depicting race, language and caste, among other categories. However, these population maps, and the more general geographically determinist argument for Pakistan, could not fully explain the large numbers of Indian Muslims who lived outside of what Spate termed ‘Pakistan proper’, and whose social and cultural practices did not entirely reflect those of the Muslims in the north-west. Indeed, it is worth noting that Spate was a prominent critic of environmental determinism and a proponent of the geographical concept of ‘possibilism’, which posits that the physical environment might give rise to certain conditions within which culture is shaped. However, according to possibilism,

<sup>23</sup> O.-H.-K. Spate, Geographical aspects of the Pakistan scheme, *The Geographical Journal* 102 (1943) 128.

<sup>24</sup> Spate, Geographical aspects of the Pakistan scheme.

<sup>25</sup> G. yanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, Third Edition, Delhi, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> This work was often circulated in the form of published pamphlets. C. Rahmat Ali, *India: The Continent of Dinia or the Country of Doom?*, Cambridge, 1946; El Hamza, *Pakistan, a Nation*, LahoreSh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1942.

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culture is constructed more through social and political processes rather than in direct response to environmental factors.<sup>27</sup>

The second argument, which also circulated among supporters of the Pakistan idea, appealed to historical and political geography to point out that India had never been unified under a single government or state. Spate argued that proponents of Pakistan were correct in that 'in the past India has rarely been united'. Yet, he continued, 'The unstated inference that this fact supports a north-south division of the Indo-Gangetic plain however by no means follows'. Indeed, it was often the case that physical and historical boundaries in India tended to divide the east and west, rather than the north and south. Consequently, Spate reasoned that the 'true' foundation of the Pakistan claim was not actually geographical but communal. According to Spate, it was demographic and economic concerns that lay at the heart of the Pakistan demand. However, 'the arguments for Pakistan' put forward by supporters of the idea, including the Muslim League, were 'to a large extent [still] avowedly based on geographical considerations', making the issue one of interest and significance to geographers.<sup>28</sup> Using the 1931 census data, Spate demonstrated that if Pakistan were to be created, the Punjab and Bengal, two large Muslim-majority provinces, would most likely be reorganised. He also argued that it was very likely that some districts of these two provinces, which proponents of Pakistan argued should be included in the new Muslim state, would have to remain in India. From a geographer's point of view, according to Spate, such a reorganisation was not ideal.<sup>29</sup>

For Spate, however, the most important problem with the concept of Pakistan was neither over the delineation of boundaries, nor with the possibility of a geographical partition, but lay with population distribution: 'There remains the larger question of the extent to which the creation of Pakistan would in fact represent self-determination for the Muslims'. According to the data that Spate had before him, if the Punjab and Bengal were included in the new state of Pakistan, approximately a third of British India's Muslim population would be left in India after the creation of Pakistan, leaving a 'scattered minority'. Alternatively, the new Muslim state would have a sizeable non-Muslim population of between forty and forty-six percent, 'minorities too large for successful assimilation'. The solution to this problem –

<sup>27</sup> D.N. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise*, Oxford, 1992.

<sup>28</sup> Spate, *Geographical aspects of the Pakistan scheme*, 125.

<sup>29</sup> Spate, *Geographical aspects of the Pakistan scheme*, 132.

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which Spate termed ‘the rectification of frontiers’, and which entailed a partition of each of the provinces – was not straightforward. Without this partition of the Punjab and Bengal, the new Pakistan would have too many non-Muslims for a state designed to be a homeland for Muslims. But with the partition, the new Pakistan would leave too many Muslims in India. Both solutions would fail to adequately fulfil the purpose of Pakistan as a homeland for India’s Muslims. Either way, Spate argued, Pakistan would be incomplete. **As he** surmised, ‘This mere fact of its incompleteness is in itself probably the strongest argument against the Pakistan idea’.<sup>30</sup>

As can be seen, Spate’s work on Pakistan anticipated many of the features and problems of the **Punjab** boundary commission. It meant that he was already familiar with the demographic issues and aware of the communal politics at the heart of the Pakistan problem. Spate recognised to a certain extent the very real conflict between the political demands associated with the idea of Pakistan and the territorial and geographical realities of its implementation. By 1947, and with the reality of Pakistan drawing nearer, he was tentatively calling himself ‘an expert witness’.<sup>31</sup>

#### IN PURSUIT OF ‘GOOD WORKING FRONTIERS’

Just days after agreeing to take on his role for the Ahmadis, Spate left London for India on Saturday 12 July 1947, travelling by steamer via Sicily and Cairo. When he arrived, he learned that those who had hired him were also representing the Muslim League’s case in the hearings, and so, while he had been brought to India to work for the Ahmadis, he also found himself serving as advisor to the League. He worked in Lahore, out of his room at the luxurious Faletti’s Hotel near the city’s governmental hub, and occasionally at the home of the Pakistani statesman Muhammad Zafrullah Khan (who was himself a member of the Ahmadiyya community); where the Muslim League’s delegation was based. He worked long hours and remarked in his journal, notes, memoir, and in a taped interview with the geographer David Hooson, upon Lahore’s unrelenting heat. Lahore was the capital city of the Punjab, the ‘most dynamic and self-confident Province of British India’ – The city, he said, was ‘incomparably the greatest centre of Islamic culture in India’, with ‘bookshops which

<sup>30</sup> Spate, *Geographical aspects of the Pakistan scheme*, 132.

<sup>31</sup> O.H.K. Spate, *The partition of the Punjab and of Bengal*, *The Geographical Journal* 110 (October 1947) 201.

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would put an English city of the same size to shame'.<sup>32</sup> The historical and cultural significance of the partitioning of the Punjab was not lost on Spate.

Spate took great care with his work and wrote that he was committed to his role. He noted that it was to be the division of 'the Land of the Five Rivers, guarding the gates of India, traversed by the great highway used by armies from before Alexander the Great to the Persian Nadir Shah in 1739, and the core both of Mogul power and that of the Sikhs, the last of the Country Powers to yield to the persistent encroachments of the British'.<sup>33</sup> While finding the decision to partition India regrettable, he believed the Muslim claim to be just. As he wrote in his journal, 'I do not like Pak[istan] in itself but realise its inevitability; and so it is important to make it as good a working unit as possible with good working frontiers. The moderation of the Muslim claim makes my personal position much easier as I am firmly convinced in my own mind, once given Pak, of the essential justice of their claim'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, he wrote elsewhere, 'once given Pakistan (an important qualification), the Muslim case seemed to me entirely legitimate. There was thus never the slightest conflict between my duty to my employers and my sense of professional fitness'.<sup>35</sup> He was deeply concerned that the League received a fair award. He liked the leaders of the Ahmadiyya community, and noted the economic importance of the Punjab for Pakistan, writing that 'The Punjab is Pakistan's only riches, Congress has virtually the resources of all India'.<sup>36</sup> He therefore set to work assisting the League in obtaining as fair and workable a settlement as possible.

Spate's insistence on his support for the Muslim League's claims speaks to a broader paradox in his role as an 'expert'. As a professional academic, he was expected to maintain a distance – objectivity, neutrality and impartiality – while dispensing his technical advice, eschewing political interests and refraining from 'taking sides'. However, in 1947, as during the world war that had just passed, applied geography was undertaken in the context of highly charged political events, where stakes were high and lives were on the line.<sup>37</sup> Spate produced

<sup>32</sup> Spate, *On the Margins of History*, 52.

<sup>33</sup> Spate, *On the Margins of History*, 52.

<sup>34</sup> [Saturday 19 July, 1947, personal diary, Spate Papers, NLA, MS 7886, 6-1-1](#).

<sup>35</sup> Spate, *The partition of the Punjab and of Bengal*, 201.

<sup>36</sup> [Saturday 26 July, 1947, pPersonal diary, Spate Papers, NLA, MS 7886, 6-1-1](#).

<sup>37</sup> Spate alluded to this problem when he explained in an address to the Royal Geographical Society why he worked on behalf of one interested party during the hearings, see: Spate, *The partition of the Punjab and of Bengal*.

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a remarkable number of maps (not all of which have been preserved), and maintained his correspondence with some of the geographers and politicians he met in India after partition. While it is possible that he was not entirely genuine in his commitment to the League, the evidence at hand suggests that, in general, he held his employers in relatively high regard. He believed in rationality and truth, and sometimes represented his aims in these terms. But it is also clear that Spate hoped his analytical expertise would have some positive political outcome, especially for the League, and a discernible influence in mitigating conflict in the region. To some degree, unlike the previous generation of geographers, Spate was an ambivalent participant in empire, critical of its violent tendencies yet party to it nonetheless due to his birth, education and professional life. Indeed, later Indian critics of his work on South Asian geography would emphasise the colonial origins of his knowledge and worldview.<sup>38</sup> Importantly, his education and experience were part and parcel of what allowed him to develop his critical perspective on the final decades of the British Empire. Like other British, French and American geographers of his generation, born at the height of empire, Spate was bound by late imperial ways of thinking while being critical of aspects of empire, and he was sceptical of his own ability to have a direct impact on the boundary commission.

Spate's work for the League consisted primarily of devising geographical justifications for the political claims they had already developed, based on a set of assumptions underpinning the academic geographical practice of the time, including accurate data, scientifically sound mapping techniques and consistent application of rules and terminology. He was also involved in developing responses and rebuttals, couched in those same geographical and scientific terms, to the other parties' claims. He drew a number of sketch maps, including strategic maps (drawn to show the hypothetical front lines and defensive positions in the event of conflict), population maps and a map showing the proposed boundary in relation to railways and possible corridors connecting Amritsar to India. He also put together a few population (age-sex) pyramids, remarking that 'on pretty well every demographic index Muslims show as most stable element of popn' in the Punjab generally.<sup>39</sup> He wrote a detailed response to the Sikh case, 'over 7 pages and I think I can

<sup>38</sup> R.P.B. Singh, *Uprooting Geographic Thoughts in India: Toward Ecology and Culture in 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Cambridge, 2009; F. Ferretti, Rediscovering other geographical traditions, *Geography Compass*, 13 (2019) DOI: [10.1111/gec3.12421](https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12421).

<sup>39</sup> Friday 25 July, 1947, pPersonal diary, [Spate Papers, NLA, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra](#), MS 7886, 6-1-1.



honestly say that they are what I would have written as a pure academic exercise, uninfluenced by the fact that I am retained by the other side'.<sup>40</sup> Few of his more unique recommendations and materials (discussed in more detail below) were utilised by the boundary commission or by Radcliffe in the final stages of drawing up the award, although he did noticeably influence the arguments ~~of-made by~~ both the League and the Ahmadiyya community to the ~~boundary~~-commission.

Throughout the boundary dispute, the relationship between the political debate and the geographical debate was evident in the cracks within and between different partition plans put forward by the various parties involved. Stuart Elden reminds us that 'territory' is constructed through the negotiation of the political and the technical, and the refashioning of colonial territory in the subcontinent into India and Pakistan was no different.<sup>41</sup> Spate wrote that the Muslim League claim 'was a good deal less than my notional division in the 1943 article'.<sup>42</sup> The League's argument, shown in Figure 1, 'stuck on the whole to population; they claimed the Bist Doab and a riverain strip on the left bank of the Sutlej'.<sup>43</sup> They claimed both Lahore and Amritsar on the grounds of contiguity, as well as Qadian (of special interest to the Ahmadiyya) and Gurdaspur, a district in the north on the Kashmir border with only a scant Muslim majority, but with contiguity and a canal headworks. The League drew their population maps using the *tehsil* (an administrative ~~unit-division~~ that was smaller than a district but larger than a village) as their unit. Muslim majorities were depicted in green and non-Muslim majorities were depicted in yellow. Spate also added the proposed boundary lines, red for the Congress-Sikh claim and blue for the Muslim claim. When Spate arrived in Lahore in the final days before the hearings began, he knew and noted that 'the Boundary Commission had already started preliminary work', and believed that the official League claim was close to the ideal technical boundary.<sup>44</sup> Importantly, Spate's ideal technical boundary was based in his assumptions about what constituted the most reliable evidence, and his belief that more scientifically accurate data and maps, rather than claims of spiritual, historical or cultural connection to the territory, should be prioritised during the process.

<sup>40</sup> [Sunday 20 July, 1947](#), pPersonal diary, [Spate Papers, NLA, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra](#), MS 7886, 6-1-1.

<sup>41</sup> S. Elden, *The Birth of Territory*, Chicago, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> ~~Spate, *On the Margins of History*, 54.~~

<sup>43</sup> [Spate, \*On the Margins of History\*, 54.](#)

<sup>44</sup> [Spate, \*On the Margins of History\*, 48.](#)

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Sbate identified defence, railways and canals as the most important geopolitical issues at stake after the population question. But he did not just assist the League in developing its claim. He was also determined to provide a geographically-informed rebuttal to the Congress and Sikh arguments. As the only geographer hired for the purpose, he found himself analysing the geographical components of a debate which was, on all sides, a legal battle. The Congress and Sikh delegations in the Punjab did not have a Western academic geographer working on either of their cases, and so Sbate's arguments, while prepared for the Muslim League and based on geographical practice, were not part of a geographical debate. Rather, his geographical expertise was inserted into a political and ideological battle which extended far beyond the realms and remit of academic geography as it was then constituted. His work was very much that of a technical advisor or an expert witness, not simply because the parties involved all failed to recognise the potential for geographers to contribute to finding a solution, but also because the geographical knowledge that framed his drawing of potential boundaries and assessing boundary claims was mobilised by the wider pseudo-legal discourse that underpinned the boundary commission process more broadly.<sup>45</sup>

This pseudo-legal discourse was informed in large part by the process of the boundary commissions, which were conducted mainly in courts of law, and overseen by judges ('of high judicial standing', as the party leaders requested), and was in many respects dictated by the British government's emphasis on the legality of the transfer of power. Indeed, when Sbate wrote that the 'Ahmadiyya were the only people concerned with the partition to whom it occurred that geography might have something to do with drawing boundaries', he was referring in large part to the British government, for which he reserved most of his criticism regarding the process.<sup>46</sup> In a press conference on 5 June 1947, for example, Louis Mountbatten, the last ~~v~~iceroy of India, said that 'In the process of quitting power in India, we must try and approach it in as legally correct a manner as possible'.<sup>47</sup> The delegation testimonies were often concerned with arguments over the interpretation of the terms of reference, as well as the legality of utilising census data, which was well-known by those

<sup>45</sup> H. Fitzpatrick, The space of the courtroom and the role of geographical evidence in the Punjab Boundary Commission hearings, July 1947, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42 (2019) 188–207.

<sup>46</sup> Sbate, *On the Margins of History*, 57.

<sup>47</sup> M.M. Sadullah, *The Partition of the Punjab, 1947: A Compilation of Official Documents*, Lahore, 1983, 131.

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involved to be inaccurate. They were also concerned with the legal rights of property and business owners, the use of authoritative texts (often legal texts, such as David Lloyd George's *The Truth About the Peace Treaties* and a volume of [the journal published by Andrew Carnegie's Endowment of International Peace](#), *International Conciliation*, ~~published produced by the American Branch of the Association for International Conciliation~~ in 1919), and the general insistence by the British government on compromise and negotiation.<sup>48</sup>

However, the dominance of legal discourse also speaks to the broader philosophical and historical construction of territory through the application of political and technical knowledge. Elden has written extensively about the relationship between law and geography in the construction of territory as a politically and technically derived 'extension of the state'.<sup>49</sup> He notes that, particularly in the colonies, the development of geographical ideas of measuring and administering territory 'led, or were partnered by, developments in legal and technical practices'.<sup>50</sup> The boundary commission hearings indicate that, by 1947, both the nationalist elite and the colonial government had, for the most part, agreed upon a cartographic and administrative mode of understanding and governing the territory they all knew to be 'India'. ~~W~~ what was at stake was a legal struggle over competing narratives of nationhood, all of which were built on this same construction of 'Indian territory'.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Pakistani nationalist discourse often struggled to assert a coherent claim to territory because it was unable to challenge the authority of the perceived geographical unity of 'India', creating the 'contradictory' discourse of Pakistan that historians so often highlight. In fact, the leaders of the League and Congress agreed that, after independence, all provinces and states would be required to join either the new Indian or the new Pakistani government, for, as Mountbatten noted, 'the good and sufficient reason that they did not wish this plan to encourage what I might call the Balkanization of India'.<sup>52</sup>

'India', and 'the Punjab', as geographical and territorial entities capable of being administered, studied and partitioned, were therefore not in dispute during the partition

<sup>48</sup> ~~David Lloyd~~ George, *The Truth About the Peace Treaties*, London, (1938); *International Conciliation* 6 (1919) 717-1462.

<sup>49</sup> ~~Elden, *The Birth of Territory*, 322.~~

<sup>50</sup> Elden, *The Birth of Territory*, 322 and 326.

<sup>51</sup> S. Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*, Durham, NC, 2009.

<sup>52</sup> ~~Sadullah, *The Partition of the Punjab*, 1947, 132.~~

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process. Nor were the identity categories that the government and the political parties applied to the Indian population in dispute (although both of these forms of knowledge are critically scrutinised and challenged by academics today). The scope and potential for Spate's technical knowledge to produce a radically new vision for the reorganising or partitioning of Indian territory were therefore constrained.

In spite of his insightful criticisms of the boundary making process, Spate's technical geographical knowledge was rooted in the same imperial logic and lineage of territory-making that had devised the shared assumptions about what constituted 'India' and 'the Punjab'. In terms of 'imagining' a new India, and perhaps more significantly of envisioning a new Pakistan, both the British government and the nationalist leaders of the Congress Party and the Muslim League were working from an historically constructed blueprint of imperial territorial sovereignty that had been scientifically imagined, mapped and legally codified from the eighteenth century onwards. Spate's criticism and scepticism was caught in a discursive loop. If the partition process was not, in fact, a technical geographical process of state-making, but was rather a political negotiation over nationhood, then the partition itself was a technical geographic fix for a political problem that was construed in specific ways. The political problem at hand was how to accommodate competing economic, cultural and religious claims to territory as it was imagined, produced and governed as a component of empires and states, and, as part of that, how appropriate boundaries could then be demarcated by the cartographer and surveyor.

For Spate, however, the question of how the political problem was to be adduced in the boundary commission proceedings, and settled by the technology of the map and survey, was a larger and more fluid one. It was about the relationship between this statecentric way of drawing lines across territory and wider and competing conceptions of particular territories as real and imagined archaic and contemporary homelands encompassing histories of dwelling, displacement and geographical struggle. Indeed, Spate pointed to the reverberation of this epistemic tension a few months later in a lecture presenting an overview of the partition process read at the Royal Geographical Society in London:

The terms of reference were hopelessly vague: 'To demarcate the boundaries of the two parts of the Punjab, on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims. In doing so, it will also take into account other factors.' The inaccurate use of the word

‘demarcate’ is symptomatic of the general vagueness; no one seriously envisaged the learned judges running around the Punjab with theodolites and concrete markers; but as the term was accepted on all hands I could only suffer in silence each time it was used, which was very often.<sup>53</sup>

Like his argument about the vagueness and lack of specificity in the Muslim League’s articulation of the territorial limits and characteristics of the proposed Pakistan, Spate’s argument here points to the unsuitability of the technical procedures of boundary making to deal with the political and historical contradictions and competition that lay at the heart of the dispute. However, if the technical process of boundary making was to appear effective in resolving the conflict, it had to be rendered in just such vague terms. This had the dual purpose of leaving open the possibility for subjectivity and professional discretion to be exercised by Radcliffe, as well as the wider need to obfuscate the process at hand in order to veil the fact that, in the end, there was only one territory to be carved up. The ambiguity of the geographical terminology applied to so much of the process allowed the terms of reference to be appropriated in political terms; while retaining a veneer of scientific rationality ~~was retained~~.

Spate therefore became embroiled in an asymmetrical debate. His technical evidence was deployed by the League in ways that were politically necessary but fell short of their potential to open what it meant to ‘demarcate’ up to a discussion and analysis that did not just revolve around the legal passage from imperial to nation-state territoriality. Spate’s recollection that he ‘suffered in silence’ was based on his knowledge that, in technical terms, demarcating (marking a boundary on the ground) was distinct from delineating a line (drawing a boundary on a map), and his observation that this was indicative of a more general vagueness that sprang, in his mind, from the courtroom’s separation of the map from more complex and fluid conceptions of territory.<sup>54</sup> To Spate’s expert geographical eye, certain elements of the boundary making process were illogical and nonsensical, and he struggled to reconcile the political and technical (a point I will return to below). For example, he emphasised the importance of precise terminology, accurate population data, consistency in technical methods, and strategic planning. Yet these components of technical boundary making, and of geographical practice more generally, were neither emphasised nor prioritised

<sup>53</sup> Spate, *The partition of the Punjab and of Bengal*, 205.

<sup>54</sup> Spate, *The partition of the Punjab and Bengal*, 205.

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during the process. In fact, the vague terms of reference that Spate beheld in Lahore lent themselves to political manipulation and manoeuvring, while the kind of geographical expertise and imagination he could offer, and which could potentially incorporate many factors, was subordinated to state calculations of territory. As a result, Spate's geographical expertise was once again limited in its potential for providing a transformative solution to the geopolitical problem of partitioning the subcontinent.

### THE EVIDENCE AND THE COURTROOM

The boundary commission hearings began on Monday 21 July 1947. Spate was in the Lahore courthouse that day. The proceedings opened with arguments presented by M.C. Setalvad, the Parsi lawyer appointed by the Congress Party. The Congress case relied very much on the 'other factors' clause, and Setalvad argued strongly that the 1941 census data, the most recent population data available, was suspect and should be disregarded in the discerning of 'majority populations'. In contrast, the Muslim League's main argument, unsurprisingly, rested on the population question. The Muslim majority areas in the contested section of the Punjab tended to correspond to the areas that Spate argued should go to Pakistan for strategic reasons, and so this particular aspect of the Muslim League claim was not difficult for him to justify. More difficult were the two most highly contested areas: Gurdaspur District, where Qadian was located and which had a slim non-Muslim majority concentrated in the western tehsils, and Amritsar District, the heart of the Sikh religion and central to the League's claim, despite the fact that Amritsar's non-Muslim majority constituted a non-Muslim 'pocket' in a Muslim-majority area.

The issue of majority and minority populations is threaded throughout all of Spate's geographical analysis of partition, before, during and after, and has remained one of the central intractable tensions in conceptualising and justifying the process. Spate's emphasis on population also speaks to his belief that this was the most equitable and just basis on which to delineate the boundary line. This preference for population data and accurate mapping, even when cases like Amritsar City and Gurdaspur District presented an intractable conundrum, illuminates the limit to how far Spate's expertise could provide workable or sustainable solutions. In fact, Spate's insistence on the scientific accuracy of his maps belies the fact that these (and all) cartographic representations of the Indian population were also shot through with political visions of India and Pakistan. Population maps actively constructed a politico-

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spatial relationship between majority groups and territory in India, effectively erasing minority groups from the map and obscuring the more complex intercultural and interreligious social relationships which existed on the ground.

The historian of cartography J.B. Harley pointed to this tendency of the map to silence competing voices, an argument that Sumathi Ramaswamy also considers in her work on Indian nationalist mapping projects.<sup>55</sup> The historically constructed cartographic claim to Pakistan put forward by proponents of the Pakistan idea emphasised that politico-spatial relationship in forming their arguments and it was this imaginary of populations as homogenous and discrete social units, each of which could (and should) be tied to a corollary territorial unit, that underpinned the partition process as a whole. However, this issue was dealt with asymmetrically in the official arguments. The Muslim League relied on the authority and legitimacy of the idea of a 'majority population' to dictate its territorial claim, while the Congress and Sikh parties attempted to undermine this authority by stressing the relevance of 'other factors'. The question of population had been significant in other partitions, including some of the most 'infamous' and violent, in Ireland and Palestine, for example, begging the question whether population was as effective and equitable a tool as geographers and politicians believed it to be, at least for the purposes of geographical partition. The issue of population was not mobilised in these different partition projects and processes in the same way. Rather, the quantitative and qualitative aspects of 'the population issue' were filtered through the specificities and complexities of the historical, geographical and cultural contexts within which geopolitical alignments and arguments were formed in different places and cases.<sup>56</sup> However, population was considered a useful category to mobilise in varied partition contexts, and particularly so during the reorganisation of territory

<sup>55</sup> J.B. Harley, Silences and secrets: the hidden agenda of cartography in early modern Europe, in: W.K. Story (Ed), *Scientific Aspects of European Expansion*, Aldershot, 1996, 161–180; Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation*.

<sup>56</sup> For a relatively recent detailed analysis of the Irish Boundary Commission, see K.-J. Rankin, The Role of the Irish Boundary Commission in the Entrenchment of the Irish Border: From Tactical Panacea to Political Liability, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 34 (2008) 422–447; for one of the earliest pieces on the difficulty of enacting a partition based on identity in Israel-Palestine, see A.S. Klieman, The Resolution of Conflicts Through Territorial Partition: The Palestine Experience, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980) 281–300; and for one of the earliest geographical treatments of partitions taking a comparative approach, see T.G. Fraser, *Partition in Ireland, India and Palestine: Theory and Practice*, New York, 1984.

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along nationalist lines during decolonisation processes. Additionally, the relationship between population and partition as a facet of decolonisation was quite a new phenomenon in 1947 and one with close affinities to longer and wider arcs of anti-colonial struggle, and thus, as Spate intimated at the RGS, a relationship that was open to debate and contestation rather than a necessarily clear, fixed or authoritative reference point or precedent for adjudicating on issues of identity and nationhood.

One of Spate's most difficult jobs arose directly from this population conundrum. As he sought to depict in a sketch map of Qadian in his notes (Fig. 2, where it is marked as K), the Ahmadiyya claim to Qadian would be difficult to defend because while it had a Muslim majority, it was located in the contested Gurdaspur District, on the boundary line between Batala and Gurdaspur tehsils.

The Ahmadiyya community presented their case to the boundary commission on Friday 25 and Saturday 26 July 1947. Primarily, they made what they called 'special claims' to Qadian, although they also argued that it fell within the contiguous Muslim-majority tehsil of Batala. Indeed, it was on this basis that Spate argued that Qadian should go to Pakistan. Their argument also focused on the Sikh claim to what they called 'certain shrines', and if the Sikhs' concerns were to be taken into account by the boundary commission, then Ahmadi concerns regarding Qadian also needed to be treated as valid. Qadian was a site of pilgrimage, where 'members of the community flock to hear learned discourses and to gain spiritual uplift'. Qadian was 'a living centre to which all people, who live in different parts of the globe look for religious and spiritual knowledge'.<sup>57</sup> In Spate's notes on the Ahmadiyya's written case, he highlighted the political importance of this argument for them:

A neutral arbitrator – which the Chairman of the Commission will be in effect – is not likely to be convinced by declarations of the paramount sanctity of a holy place. This may be absolute truth for one community; but the same will hold for the holy places of other communities, and thus to an outsider, who is not bound by this essentially subjective view, the two cancel each other out.... Therefore if the arguments cancel out it is a

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<sup>57</sup> Sadullah, *The Partition of the Punjab*, 1947, 245.



fundamental plank of the Sikh platform which is lost, but only an ancillary one of the Ahmaddiyya [sic].<sup>58</sup>

It was on the basis of details like this that Spate subsequently mused in a more general way at the RGS on different and competing conceptions of territoriality as inherently 'subjective' and not amenable to 'demarcation' in any straightforward way.<sup>59</sup> In the end, Qadian went to India, and after partition when the Punjab was overcome by riots and unrest, and communication and transportation infrastructure were damaged, circumstances were deemed too insecure by the Ahmadi leadership to remain there, and the community moved its headquarters across the border to Pakistan.

Amritsar presented a problem for the Sikhs which was similar to that of Qadian for the Ahmadiyya, although Radcliffe saw fit to award Amritsar District to India, drawing the border at Wagah, between Lahore and Amritsar. Amritsar District had a clear Muslim majority and was well within a contiguous Muslim area. Amritsar City, however, had a Sikh majority, and was the spiritual and administrative heart of the Sikh community. More importantly, however, Amritsar's economic and geographical position in the Punjab meant that it was extremely valuable. Unlike Qadian, which Spate argued should be given to Pakistan as part of the tehsil within which it was located, his geographical solutions to the Amritsar question ~~related to~~ relied on alternatives to territorial contiguity. Both sides insisted the district should go to them. Spate argued, both before and after partition, that Amritsar District should have gone to Pakistan, both for reasons of contiguity and due to economic factors. Indeed, he wrote in his notes, 'Amritsar is the key to the whole boundary problem'.<sup>60</sup> He returned to the issue after the boundary commission hearings in Lahore had ended, and as Radcliffe and the commission debated matters further at Simla, noting that 'most of my time was spent in thinking up fancy precedents for extra-territoriality, enclaves, condominiums, free zones, corridors and what have you, all to secure Amritsar and Gurdaspur Districts to Pakistan while ensuring Sikh access to their Golden Temple in Amritsar City'. But all of this turned out to be 'Labour in vain'.<sup>61</sup> Again, Spate's attempts to use the tools available to

<sup>58</sup> [Brief note on Ahmaddiya Memorandum \[sic\], Spate Papers, NLA, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra](#), MS 7886, 6-1-1.

<sup>59</sup> [Spate, The Partition of the Punjab and of Bengal](#),

<sup>60</sup> [Brief note on Ahmaddiya Memorandum \[sic\], Spate Papers, NLA, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra](#), MS 7886, 6-1-1.

<sup>61</sup> [Spate, On the Margins of History](#), 57.

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experts in geographical practice, namely those of cartography and territorial ordering, remained a thought experiment, a possibility that could not be incorporated into the wider political negotiations.

One of Spate's most fascinating sets of notes relates to these enclaves and corridors. Like most of his recommendations, the idea was never seriously considered by the Punjab Boundary Commission (and was neither mentioned in the hearings nor in the memoranda to them), but Spate spent a great deal of time and energy trying to devise a way to make a 'corridor' work. As he wrote in his notes at the time, 'If A[mritsar] & T.T. [Tarn Taran] are to be included in E. P[unjab] as non M[uslim] maj[ority] tahsils it is only just that the M[uslim] maj[ority] tahsils E[ast] of B[eas]-S[utlej] should go to W. Pj'. He continued, 'Should Amritsar and Tarn Taran tehsils be allotted to E. Punjab, the question of their connection with its main territory by a corridor might arise'.<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, enclaves were included in the final award in Bengal, although corridors were not part of either award.

On a fundamental level, the corridor idea challenged the notion of a border as the territorial marker of absolute sovereignty by creating a strip of territory that, rather than restricting access entirely, would channel access to specific, highly contested spaces for those whose religious and cultural lives would otherwise be severely diminished. The corridor idea provided an alternative to territorial contiguity in favour of a more accurate division of population. When territorial contiguity conflicted with the possibility of homogenised populations, which was the more important component of the nation? Interestingly, the notion conjures up Jinnah's proposal for a 'land bridge' which might have connected East and West Pakistan, and ensured its survival as a single nation-state. Jinnah's corridor was never seriously considered, most likely because the discourse of minority and majority populations had become so central to the partition plan, and had ruled out the possibility of an alternative organisation of territory which did not depend so heavily on population statistics. Although Spate did not believe that religious claims to territory would create a workable boundary when they contradicted strategic and population-based claims (as, he argued, the Congress-Sikh claim to Amritsar City did), he recognised that the boundary commission would likely give Amritsar City to India based on its non-Muslim majority, and as part of a tit-for-tat compromise where Lahore would go to Pakistan. He also recognised that 'enclaves' might be

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<sup>62</sup> Note on possible corridors, Spate Papers, NLA, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 7886, 6-1-1.

a geographical solution to the intractable contradictions inherent in the terms of reference which stressed both majority population and territorial contiguity.

Sbate outlined three possibilities for such corridors (Fig. 3), none of which were ideal: '(a) SW of Beas-Sutlej confluence (b) via Jullundur (c) down from Kangra'. The Jullundur corridor followed a railway, and the Kangra corridor followed the west bank of the river Beas. Neither was a particularly workable solution, according to Sbate. They made access to the Bist doab (the strip of land to the west of the corridors) nearly impossible for West Punjab and Indian access to the corridors would be very 'roundabout'. The remaining corridor, from the south-west of the Beas-Sutlej confluence, was the least objectionable of the three. It would require the building of a bridge across the Sutlej, but rail connections were generally simple. This corridor, however, cut across two 'very important' railways.<sup>63</sup>

Most of Sbate's technical work on the boundary demonstrates that the Punjab Boundary Commission faced a nearly intractable conundrum. If they stuck to the population question entirely, the Muslim League's claim was the most accurate and robust. However, the canal and railway infrastructure, as well as the historically constructed economic and social organisation of the Punjab meant that the partition process would inevitably cut across railway lines, or divide canal headworks from their rivers, or leave majority populations on the wrong side of the new border. Geographical knowledge could only go so far to mitigate the damage a partition would do.

#### ANALYSING THE ARGUMENTS

Sbate also spent a great deal of time working through the Congress delegation's method for producing what scholars of partition have subsequently termed the 'red map', in which non-Muslim majority areas were shaded red (Fig. 4). He declared that the Congress claims were 'amazing', and 'supported by an amazing map', 'a giant gerrymander'.<sup>64</sup> He argued that it was 'an ambit claim by Congress (one cannot be too sure for the Sikhs)', an attempt to gain the best outcome for India.<sup>65</sup>

The red map attempted to deploy the authority of the cartographic gaze by abstracting and simplifying the geographical and statistical data of the census records and survey maps,

<sup>63</sup> Note on possible corridors, Sbate Papers, NLA, MS 7886, 6-1-1.

<sup>64</sup> Personal diary, Papers of Oskar Sbate, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 7886, 6-1-1.

<sup>65</sup> Sbate, *On the Margins of History*, 54.

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and by using the seemingly scientific authority of a map to obfuscate that data. While the Muslim League map was shaded with Muslim-majority areas represented in green and non-Muslim-majority areas represented in yellow, the Congress map leaves all Muslim areas white and unshaded, effectively rendering the Muslim population of the Punjab entirely unrepresented and invisible. The red map both challenged the geographical accuracy of the Muslim League maps, despite the fact that, as Spate observed, 'a very cursory inspection of the new Congress map shows that it cannot be accurate', and worked to more emphatically declare that Punjab was a non-Muslim state. Spate placed the 'accuracy' of his geographical thinking and maps at the political disposal of the Muslim League, and for rational rather than simply partisan ends. The red map claimed for India large areas of what were clearly Muslim majority tehsils. Deploying a geographical counter-argument, Spate noted that in order for the Congress claims to be accurate:

the Muslims must be (a) almost equal to non-Muslims in the non-Muslim areas, (b) in overwhelming majority in the Muslim areas, which areas (c) must be more densely populated than the rest. A distribution like (a) and (b) is inherently extremely unlikely, one might almost say impossible, and a glance at a topographical map shows (c) to be absurd.<sup>66</sup>

He continued, 'On general grounds then anyone with any experience of dealing with population maps would be justified in suspecting very strongly the authenticity of the map'.<sup>67</sup> Importantly, Spate assumed prior knowledge, noting that in order to challenge the map, one needed 'experience'.<sup>68</sup> He then worked backwards in order to ascertain how the red map was drawn. To illustrate his point, he drew a population map of Sheikhupura tehsil (Fig. 5), chosen at random and located in the middle of the disputed area of central Punjab, between the Ravi and Chenab rivers.

On the Congress map, much of Sheikhupura tehsil had been shaded red and claimed for India, and he included a small sketch from the red map to illustrate this. Spate's sketch map indicates how the Congress map tried to claim contiguity by arguing that Muslim-majorities were contained in small 'pockets', and therefore able to be included in East Punjab

<sup>66</sup> [Note on the Congress map, Spate Papers, NLA, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra](#), MS 7886, 6-1-1.

<sup>67</sup> [Personal diary, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra](#), MS 7886, 6-1-1.

<sup>68</sup> [Note on the Congress map, Spate Papers, NLA, MS 7886, 6-1-1.](#)

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as part of larger, contiguous non-Muslim areas. The larger map, also drawn by Spate, shows that, in fact, Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority villages were evenly dispersed, and were represented inaccurately on the red map. Spate's own map was evidently designed to [make convincing arguments](#) and was drawn in much greater detail than some of his others. He includes the scale, along with population figures, and he prominently notes how the village is his chosen unit. He used the map to argue that the Congress claim was fallacious, and provided enough detail for the League to present the map to the commission in response to the Congress testimony:

A rough population map was constructed from which it seemed fairly clear that the method used in constructing the Congress map was (i) to subtract obvious Muslim pockets (ii) to regard these as being practically solid Muslim (iii) deduct some sort of figure for these Muslims large enough to make the new total non-Muslim appear in majority over the rest of the area.<sup>69</sup>

In other words, Spate demonstrated how the Congress map assumed that the Muslim populations of each district and tehsil were heavily concentrated in a few small areas, thereby supporting a claim of 'contiguity' in terms of land area. According to Spate, 'the density of population of the Muslim areas would have to be at least 25% higher than that of the area as a whole for this method to work; such an assumption is of course glaringly false'.<sup>70</sup> As has been discussed, Spate's Sheikhpura tehsil map 'shows that the population is in fact spread out pretty evenly, as might be expected'. On the last day of the proceedings in Lahore, Setalvad 'confirmed [Spate's] conjecture as to the manner of construction' of the Congress red map.<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, the red map did not serve as a blueprint for a boundary, but neither did the Muslim League's more statistically accurate map. The recognition by the Congress representative that their map was gerrymandered did not, in fact, render the Congress case invalid. Spate's emphasis on statistical and cartographic accuracy as the most valid and legitimate forms of evidence was just one mode of arguing for a territorial claim. One of the

<sup>69</sup> [Note on the Congress map, Spate Papers, NLA, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra](#), MS 7886, 6-1-1.

<sup>70</sup> [Note on the Congress map, Spate Papers, NLA, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra](#), MS 7886, 6-1-1.

<sup>71</sup> [Construction of the Congress map, Spate Papers, NLA, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra](#), MS 7886, 6-1-1.

other forms of evidence presented to the Punjab Boundary Commission revolved around the nature and scope of the 'other factors' which were allowed for by the terms of reference. In particular, the 'other factors' clause was invoked to justify the most important aspects of the Sikh community's claims to most of the disputed area of the Punjab.

As noted above in relation to Amritsar, the Sikh claims presented an intractable problem for the Punjab Boundary Commission. The total Sikh population in India was, in real terms, minimal, especially when compared with the Hindu and Muslim populations. The Sikhs were important because the Punjab was, and is, the heart of their religious, cultural and linguistic community. The Sikh claim was based primarily on historically constructed affective ties to the Punjab – pointing once more to those expansive and fluid conceptions of territoriality, in this instance as homeland and sacralised space. The Sikhs had no majority in any tehsil or district, and so their claim necessarily relied purely on the 'other factors' clause. They presented a list of sacred sites located in the Punjab which they insisted go to India.

Additionally, the Sikh claim stressed, at great length, the unique relationship that they had to the land of the Punjab, arguing regularly that the Sikhs were 'rooted in the soil', an argument that stressed the importance of their agricultural livelihoods, calling all others (primarily Muslims) in the Punjab 'floating' populations, able to migrate easily and with a less valid economic, historical or cultural claim to territory, a notion which Spate called 'ridiculous'.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Spate believed that any of the communities in the Punjab could mobilise an argument using historical and economic ties to the productivity and cultural significance of the territory primarily because of the subjective, malleable and ultimately affective meanings involved. This argument was, presumably, too nebulous and difficult to defend with geographical evidence – a different form of vagueness from the issue of vague terminology discussed above. Spate's insistence on precise terminology, population data, environmental factors and economic realities demonstrates his idea of what constituted reliability and validity when considering the various claims. Yet, as analysed above, Spate seemingly contradicted his own position by alluding to the importance of 'other factors' in the argument for Qadian, some of which were also 'subjective' ~~faetors~~. He called attention to this tension in his notes and diaries, but was unable to provide an entirely satisfactory justification using purely geographical arguments. Rather, he chose to use the Sikh argument

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<sup>72</sup> [Comments on the Sikh case, Spate Papers, NLA, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra](#), MS 7886, 6-1-1.

as a bargaining tool, saying that if the commission considered the Sikhs' claims to be valid 'other factors', then the Ahmadiyya community had a similarly valid claim to Qadian.

Despite this acknowledgement that geographical claims were not always compatible with political ones, Spate importantly used the Sikh claim to illustrate just what he believed 'other factors' meant in geographical terms: 'I would suggest that the natural meaning, in accordance with precedent usage, is that it is analogous to the powers rightly given to boundary demarcators in the field to make minor deviations from the originally defined line on paper to meet obvious geographical anomalies, being guided by common sense'.<sup>73</sup> As postcolonial observers writing nearly seventy years after partition, we are often hesitant to make such bold statements in support of 'fact' and 'common sense' with regard to the process, and rightly so in light of the violence and trauma that attended the weeks and months following partition. Yet Spate's assumption of what constituted 'common sense' demonstrates not just his European position, but also how, even in the midst of a heated political negotiation, he relied on a set of assumptions about how accurate geographical science and objective truths should still underpin a boundary making exercise, assumptions that were themselves born out of his [geographical expertise-in-boundary-making](#). He therefore still emphasised geographical accuracy and scientific approaches to determining majority populations, despite the fact that these things were sometimes in direct competition with nationalist imaginings of independent India and Pakistan, imaginings which in many ways could not be transformed into physical and territorial reality through imperial Anglo-European boundary making techniques alone.

## CONCLUSION

We know now that nearly one million people were killed in riots which swept across the Punjab after independence, while twice that number were displaced and crossed the border. As I have sought to show in this paper, and with Spate as both an influence on and witness to the Punjab Boundary Commission proceedings, the partition process itself was a complicated negotiation between the discourses of politics, law and geography. These discourses often bled into one another and were often characterised by a sense of seemingly intentional vagueness, allowing for ambiguity and confusion. The way they were put together frequently

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<sup>73</sup> [Comments on the Sikh Case, Spate Papers, NLA, Papers of Oskar Spate, National Library of Australia, Canberra](#), MS 7886, 6-1-1.

betrayed political expediency rather than the type of geographical expertise and rationality propounded by Spate (and often by commentators today). The vagueness of language, territorial claims, and evidence all contributed to a process that, to Spate's trained eye, obfuscated the measured and observed realities of data so as to make space for competing and contradictory claims. Yet the partition process was both a technical boundary making procedure and a battle between multiple imagined future nations that existed within the same territorial space, and upon the same map. Until the moment the boundary was enacted, those imagined homelands could exist together in a discursive arena that, despite their ideological battles, also worked to challenge the still-existent Empire. But after the awards were made and the borders were drawn, a new territorial reality was imposed. Importantly, this new reality did not match any of the proposed future nations, and the technical method of partition, framed within a pseudo-legal discourse of negotiation and compromise, failed to alleviate the increasingly volatile relations between communities in India. Even if the process had taken greater care over the geographical details, and been based on an empirically driven 'common sense', the final award would not have solved the conflicts between the various territorial imaginations at play.

Nevertheless, despite the heated political negotiations and the pronounced ideological leanings of the claims, the boundary commission hearings retained a façade of geographical authority. In this case, the articulations of knowledge and power, and principles and expediency – the very stuff of geography's much longer entanglement with empire – came at a moment of profound symbolic significance. Spate's role in the process speaks to the challenge for colonial geographers to work effectively as applied scientists in such fraught political contexts. Spate's geographical work on the frontier of a nascent India and Pakistan was conducted within a discipline that was changing as the imperial world began to reorganise itself. As a result, geographers often found themselves in a position similar to Spate's, working on behalf of the colonised subject for the purpose of assisting them in achieving self-rule, while working through an imperial worldview that wielded Western knowledge, science and rationality in an authoritative fashion, and with the map as a prime political technology. Despite (or perhaps because of) his professed preference for rationality, objective data and common sense approaches, Spate was not always able to provide the Muslim League with a robust geographical solution to the boundary problem at hand, in part because of the profound ways in which competing nationalist claims to Indian territory at

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once challenged and reinforced European assumptions about what constituted a legitimate nation-state in the subcontinent.

The partition of India and Pakistan was violent and traumatic. While Spate did not experience the pain of partition, he certainly grasped the profoundly divisive effects of drawing lines on maps, and his involvement in the partition process might be treated as a metaphor for the janus-faced entanglement of geography and empire after World War II. There was no well-defined boundary between a geography, or a cartographic gaze, that was once complicit in empire and one that easily lent itself to the aspirations of independence in situations of decolonisation.

NOTES